



Grizzly Bear Recovery

Basic Questions and Answers

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How long will it be before the grizzly bear is removed from the threatened & endangered species list?

Only the Yellowstone population of grizzlies -- not any of the other five populations in the Lower 48 States -- is getting close to recovery. There are still several steps that must be accomplished to complete implementation of the Recovery Plan, before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would consider proposing "delisting" for the Yellowstone population. In addition to population-based recovery criteria, which have been met for the Yellowstone ecosystem, habitat-based criteria in the Recovery Plan are being revised and must be met as well.

An important step is finalizing the interagency Conservation Strategy, which is a comprehensive plan for how the states and federal land management agencies will monitor and manage grizzly bear populations after delisting. The draft Conservation Strategy, released March 2, 2000, is open for public comment until May 31; after review of these comments, the Service expects to finalize the document by the end of 2000. The Strategy, however, would not actually be implemented until delisting occurs in the future.

There are several other actions that must be taken by the states and federal land management agencies in grizzly country before Recovery Plan implementation can be considered completed for Yellowstone. For example, the Recovery Plan calls for states to prohibit non-regulated shooting of grizzlies, in order to sustain recovered populations. While state laws allowing such shooting are currently superseded by the protection of the federal Endangered Species Act, state law would take effect if the grizzlies in Yellowstone were delisted. Currently, the State of Montana still has a law on the books which allows unregulated shooting and thus does not comply with the Recovery Plan requirement. Even if all other Recovery Plan tasks were completed, the Service would not propose delisting of this bear population until that requirement is met. The State of Montana legislature, with sole power to change its law, is not scheduled to meet to consider the law change until March, 2001.

Whenever the Service publishes a delisting proposal, public comments are accepted and considered; it is usually about a 1-year process from a formal proposal to the final decision about whether or not to delist.

If the grizzly is delisted in Yellowstone, will it still be protected in the other areas?

Yes. The other populations would remain federally protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and recovery activities would continue. The eventual goal of all recovery plans for threatened or endangered species is to establish self-sustaining populations that are no longer in need of federal protection.

Will hunting and other killing of grizzly bears be allowed in the Yellowstone area if that population is delisted in the future?

After removal from federal protection, grizzly bear management would be the responsibility of the states and would be conducted under strict limits on human-caused mortality, as outlined in the final Conservation Strategy. Management of “problem” bears (those threatening humans or, in some cases, livestock) currently includes some lethal control; such a control option would continue under state management. Pursuant to the Conservation Strategy under state management, limited sport hunting may also be allowed within strict limits on human-caused mortalities.

What would happen after delisting if the Yellowstone population started to go back down?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with the help of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC), developed the Conservation Strategy with enough protective measures and safeguards to maintain a recovered population; thus, the likelihood of the population sustaining an unhealthy decline after recovery and delisting is very low. However, if the population ever appears to be at risk, the Service has the authority to initiate a status review and consider whether the species should be relisted under the ESA. Citizens may also petition at any time to have this status review and relisting conducted. In dire circumstances, immediate action in the form of “emergency listing” is also available under the law, so federal protection could always be reinstated in the future if needed.

What is the current status of the Conservation Strategy for Yellowstone?

The Conservation Strategy was released for public comment on March 2, 2000. Based on the comments received by May 31, changes in the Strategy will be made and the revised final document is released by the end of 2000. The final Conservation Strategy will include Habitat-Based Criteria, which were previously released for public comment and are being finalized.

How are grizzlies doing in the other areas?

Next to the population in the Yellowstone ecosystem, the population in the Northern Continental Divide area is faring the best, with perhaps 300-400 grizzlies. The populations in the other three inhabited ecosystems are not faring as well, with at most only a few dozens bears each in the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak areas, and only a handful in the North Cascades; these three populations are on the Service’s candidate list to be reclassified in the future as “endangered,” a more protective designation than the current “threatened” status. Pending such reclassification, which will occur once other higher-priority species are protected, those grizzly bear populations will continue to receive federal protection as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act.

Why don’t we know the exact number of grizzlies living in each area?

Because grizzly bears are solitary and living in remote, secluded areas, it is extremely time-consuming, expensive, and difficult to keep an exact, ongoing count of the bears. Instead, for purposes of tracking recovery of the population, a more efficient method for estimating minimum populations is being used in Yellowstone. There are also population studies occurring in the Northern Continental Divide ecosystem using genetic analysis of hair samples collected in the field. Currently, the Service is researching new and more efficient methods for counting

bears and estimating total population.

- 3 -

Are grizzly bears going to be reintroduced into the Bitterroot Mountains?

Such a reintroduction plan was selected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the preferred alternative in a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), released in July 1997. An analysis of public comments has been conducted, and the final EIS is expected to be released in March, 2000. If the Service decides that the initial preferred alternative will be adopted, it expects to publish a Record of Decision by the end of 2000. If the decision to reintroduce bears is made, implementation of the reintroduction plan would then depend upon sufficient funding for the project. Ultimate success of the reintroduction effort, however, would depend highly upon the willingness of human residents and visitors in the Bitterroot ecosystem area to share their wildland surroundings with the bears.

How can I get more information and keep up with news about grizzly bears?

You can check these websites:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

<http://www.r6.fws.gov/endspp>

Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC)

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/wildlife/igbc>

Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team (IGBST)

<http://www.mesc.usgs.gov/yellowstone/IGBST-home.htm>

or contact:

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